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Books / Taylor Branch

THE STEALTH OF NATIONS

"... Powers brilliantly understands the CIA on its own terms, but he ducks the chance to question its need for secrecy ..."

The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA, *by Thomas Powers. Knopf, $12.95.*

Snarled myths are the lure of the spy world, so it is no wonder that a thorough investigator like Thomas Powers finds himself addressing a fundamental question: If a tree falls in the forest without a witness, is there any sound? "The CIA would say no," writes Powers. "If you can hide the evidence and keep the secrets, then you can write the history. If no one knows we tried to kill Castro, then we didn't do it."

Acting on this premise, the CIA has played with our history since World War II. Chroniclers of the Cuban missile crisis, unaware that CIA operatives were trying to kill Castro before, during, and after the emplacement of the Russian missiles, passed their ignorance along to the public, creating what Powers calls "a child's history." This is one of his most penetrating themes, and he is well aware of its ironies—how Americans, so historically aware of themselves as "the last, best hope of mankind," seem to be losing their sense of historical destiny just as they are discovering an ugly subterranean level in their own past.

Powers's book reads like the first draft of a major work in the new field of secret history. The scope is staggering. Powers has to create the CIA, outline its growth in the national-security apparatus, sketch the CIA leaders and detail their rivalries, and then take us over the vast territory from the Marshall Plan to Watergate. Nothing winds up quite as it seemed before. The author evaluates the secret element with skill (though I do think some CIA racism sneaks into his breezy account of the 1964 events in the Congo). His characters are not yet as vivid as the ones in Nixon's tapes or Shakespeare's tragedies, but Powers does elevate the child's history to at least college level.

Having done all this in one volume is a remarkable achievement that

would have satisfied most writers, but Powers is an ambitious man. He intertwines his biography of the CIA with one of Richard Helms, its former boss and personification. This literary device might have succeeded in rendering the institutional tale more human, but Powers only keeps telling us that Helms is taciturn, official, and removed—the complete bureaucrat. With all his diligence, Powers has failed to unearth a single significant anecdote about Helms, nothing with a heartbeat. The title of the book is apt: Helms kept the secrets from Powers as well.

Although Powers lays out the record of Helms's unsavory deeds, he offsets this by disfavoring his rivals, such as William Colby and Lyman Kirkpatrick, and by favoring his allies, such as James Angleton. He pronounces that Colby "junked counterintelligence" by firing Angleton, which is like saying that the Mets could have "junked baseball" by telling Willie Mays he couldn't play anymore. Helms benefits from a rather artificial distinction between the headstrong "bad" CIA leaders, like Allen Dulles, and the "good" ones, like Helms, who prefer "quieter forms of coercion." This distinction allows Powers to claim that Helms was "skeptical" of every CIA idea that led to scandal, though he was complicitous in most and downright opposed to none.

In the end, Powers ascribes a certain nobility to Helms's steadfast devotion to secrecy itself, its secrecy from its reception to eternity." Although there is no major episode in his book to make anyone, hawk or dove, thankful for this kind of secrecy, Powers resigns himself to the need for it, and thus for people like Helms.

Far less sure of the CIA in principle than in factual description, Powers falls back on spy clichés: that an intelligence service is "as close to a nation's vitals as a vault is to a bank's" and "like a missile system controlled by a single button." He justifies the CIA with the old saw that "a President needed more choices than the dispatch of a white paper or the Marines." This last is sloppy, for it implies that a president would have no such choices without the CIA, when in fact he has hundreds. It also implies that the choices lie in one graded continuum of response, when the CIA option is different in kind because of its inherent secrecy. When the question of "national security" intrudes, we wind up being urged to support the president blindly. Powers expresses this royalist way of thinking in appropriate banalities: "The President is the sun in the CIA's solar system . . . the Central Intelligence Agency and its director serve the President alone." The president is "the one man entitled to an honest answer."

Elsewhere Powers is the tough old *Rolling Stone* CIA critic laboring brilliantly and successfully to understand the CIA on its own terms. But clichés and fatalism substitute for argument over such fundamental issues as how much secrecy is actually required for the safety of the nation and to what extent secrecy corrupts the precarious democratic process by which citizens are supposed to check the selfish interests of those in government. He concludes that the CIA is "one of the fatal facts of modern life, like taxes, prisons, and armies," and he seems resigned to the fact that no one of significance is even questioning the need for a huge bureaucracy built on Helms's secrecy. Powers, apparently still in conflict, ducks the opportunity to be the first such person. Having detested the child's history enough to devote years to its revision, he obviously has no choice but to remain children.

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